

December 4, 2007

Interview with John and Margaret Brown

By Richard Barnes

[Items enclosed in brackets [ ] are editorial notes inserted for clarification]

**Barnes:** It's December 4th, 2007 and I'm interviewing John Brown here in Brownsburg, Virginia, for the Brownsburg Museum oral history collection. John is a lifelong resident of the Brownsburg area and we'll be talking with him today about his impressions and his life in this area. Margaret Brown is also with us today, the sister of John Brown, and we're also going to be interviewing her. John and Margaret, how long have you all lived in the Brownsburg area?

**John Brown:** 83 years.

**Barnes:** So you have been a lifelong resident of...

**John Brown:** Yes, I have.

**Barnes:** ...the Brownsburg area?

**John Brown:** Yeah.

**Barnes:** Were you born in Brownsburg?

**John Brown:** No.

**Barnes:** And where were you born?

**John Brown:** Born in Kings Daughters Hospital in Staunton [on March 23, 1924].

**Barnes:** In Staunton? Well, where did your family live before they moved to Brownsburg? You've always lived here but where did your family come from...

**John Brown:** Augusta County.

**Barnes:** Where?

**John Brown:** Augusta County.

**Barnes:** Just north of us here.

**Margaret Brown:** My mother came from Calloway.

**Barnes:** And your mother was from Calloway.

**John Brown:** Yeah.

**Margaret Brown:** She came over to teach.

**Barnes:** And was a teacher and you said she taught at Brownsburg about seven years?

**John Brown:** Yeah.

**Margaret Brown:** Yes.

**Barnes:** And who were your parents? What were their names?

**John Brown:** Herbert Brown.

**Barnes:** Herbert.

**John Brown:** Herbert.

**Barnes:** Herbert Brown and...?

**John Brown:** And Ida.

**Barnes:** And Ida?

**John Brown:** Uh huh.

**Barnes:** And Ida Brown. All right. How many generations of your family lived in this area? I guess you just answered that. You were the first real generation, I guess, that lived here because your parents moved here from somewhere else.

**John Brown:** Yes.

**Margaret Brown:** Grandfather.

**Barnes:** Your grandfather lived here. I think you mentioned that to me.

**John Brown:** My grandfather came here and married a Cornelia Wilson and they moved into the Wilson house, which was over at the Sunset Farms, which been tore down now.

**Barnes:** And what was your grandfather's name?

**John Brown:** George Alexander Brown.

**Barnes:** George Alexander Brown. What is your first memory of Brownsburg, either one of you, in that you grew up here? What was your first memory of Brownsburg?

**John Brown:** Going to school here.

**Barnes:** And you started school in the first grade, I guess, up at the Brownsburg school?

**John Brown:** No, I started school in Fairfield.

**Barnes:** Oh, in Fairfield before you came to Brownsburg.

**John Brown:** My mother taught school here and she wanted us to come to school here with her.

**Barnes:** Oh, I see. So when your mother started teaching in Brownsburg, you all transferred to Brownsburg from Fairfield?

**John Brown:** Yeah, yes. That's right.

**Barnes:** I see. That's good. Do you have any other relatives in the Brownsburg area, living in the Brownsburg area now?

**John Brown:** No.

**Barnes:** All right. And you just mentioned that you did attend both Fairfield schools as well as the Brownsburg School and, after completing school, you've spent all your adult life here in northern Rockbridge County then, in the Brownsburg area?

**John Brown:** Yeah. The Fairfield school was back of the old post office in Fairfield, a two-room school.

**Barnes:** A two-room school in Fairfield.

**John Brown:** Then we went up to the big school, got on the bus up there. But we didn't go to the big school. I went to-- I took business, they had a little business school over there. I went to Fairfield School then after I graduated Brownsburg.

**Barnes:** So you did do kind of some post-graduate, after you graduated as a senior, you did some business schooling?

**John Brown:** Yes, I went to business school there.

**Margaret Brown:** I went to Dunsmore and studied.

**Barnes:** And you went to Dunsmore after you graduated? I see.

**Margaret Brown:** <inaudible> four years <inaudible>.

**Barnes:** After you got well, you went to Dunsmore. Well, that's good. Well, you had farmed, I guess, you all had farmed over on McClure [Boulevard] most your life then?

**John Brown:** I farmed up 'til '71 and then I drove the school bus.

**Barnes:** I remember you driving the school bus and-- but you primarily -- were you in the sheep business and that sort of thing?

**John Brown:** Yeah. Sheep and cattle.

**Barnes:** Sheep and cattle. And you've always lived over on McClure [Boulevard], on that farm?

**John Brown:** We lived there-- well, they bought that place from McClure.

**Barnes:** I see. So it has a long historical background, doesn't, it, to say the least?

**John Brown:** Yeah.

**Barnes:** You all have always been members of New Providence [Presbyterian] church?

**John Brown:** Yes.

**Barnes:** Do you remember what year you all joined that church? I'm taxing your-- I'm glad you're not asking me that question. [laughter] Do you know approximately how long you've been a member of that church, New Providence church?

**John Brown:** Probably joined it in the '30s.

**Barnes:** 1930s?

**John Brown:** Yeah.

**Barnes:** And, of course, you've been going there ever since.

**John Brown:** Yes.

**Barnes:** Describe what it was like to live in the Brownsburg area as you were growing up. You know, you mentioned you had gone to school here. What did you do to entertain yourselves or you and your friends?

**John Brown:** Well, we'd sometimes come in here and join up and then go to a movie.

**Barnes:** Movies were big then.

**John Brown:** Bunch of the boys.

**Barnes:** Yeah. Who were some of your closest friends here, John, in Brownsburg, or the Brownsburg area?

**John Brown:** Ed Patterson.

**Barnes:** Ed Patterson.

**John Brown:** Mc Sterrett.

**Barnes:** Mc Sterrett. Didn't Benny Fauber kind of run around in that group, too?

**John Brown:** Yes. Well, he-- he came down sometimes.

**Barnes:** But all those are very prominent names in this area. Do you all remember any of your teachers that were at the Brownsburg School particularly other than your mother? A principal?

**Margaret Brown:** Miss [Ocie] Trimmer.

**John Brown:** Miss Trimmer.

**Barnes:** Oh, Miss Trimmer. I've heard about Miss Trimmer.

**John Brown:** Miss Trimmer.

**Barnes:** I understand she really ran that with an iron fist.

**John Brown:** Yeah, she ran it like a military school.

**Barnes:** That's what I understand. Everybody's mentioned Miss Trimmer in these oral history interviews.

**Margaret Brown:** Mrs. John Patterson.

**Barnes:** Mrs. John Patterson?

**John Brown:** Yeah.

**Barnes:** And what about a Mrs. Williams? Do you remember a Mrs. Williams that taught...

**John Brown:** Miss Amole.

**Barnes:** Miss who?

**John Brown:** Miss Amole.

**Barnes:** Uh huh.

**Margaret Brown:** Pauline Wade.

**Barnes:** Pauline Wade was a teacher up there. And you all lived in the Brownsburg area during the Depression then.

**John Brown:** Yes.

**Barnes:** But the fact that you lived on a farm, did that help?

**John Brown:** Oh yeah.

**Barnes:** Help you get through the Depression?

**John Brown:** Oh, you'd eat chicken for Sunday and you had a good garden, and we killed three hogs.

**Barnes:** So you didn't have to, like a lot of people...

**John Brown:** Had eggs, plenty of eggs.

**Barnes:** ...depended on, you know, when they lived in the city, people that were farmers and lived on the land did pretty well because they...

**John Brown:** We ate well. We ate well.

**Barnes:** And they were raising their own meat and vegetables and...

**John Brown:** Yeah.

**Barnes:** ...fared pretty well. In other words, there was plenty on the table.

**Margaret Brown:** Killed a beef.

**Barnes:** Killed a beef. Well, what changes have you seen in the Brownsburg area, during your lifetime, that you think have really changed the area?

**John Brown:** All the businesses here have closed. They're not here any more.

**Barnes:** You're talking about the general stores that...



**John Brown:** Yeah.

**Barnes:** ...were so prevalent in this area...

**John Brown:** Yes.

**Barnes:** ...during that time?

**John Brown:** Mm hm.

**Barnes:** What about in more recent years? What changes have you seen come about?

**John Brown:** Well, there haven't been very many changes. Still the same old town.

**Barnes:** What about the area in which you live? I drove through that area...

**John Brown:** Oh, my area changed. We got about 30 new houses there now.

**Barnes:** That was just what I was going to mention. I hadn't been through McClure [Boulevard] in a pretty good while and I just couldn't believe all of the new houses that were being...

**John Brown:** We have a development called Sunset Farms. It has 20 houses in it.

**Barnes:** Now, was that part of your property?

**John Brown:** I sold it.

**Barnes:** And that's across the road from where you live, isn't it?

**John Brown:** Yes.

**Barnes:** I remember seeing that sign, Sunset...

**John Brown:** Back there about a mile, back in there.

**Barnes:** That has, I think, been probably one of the biggest changes brought about is so many people have moved to this area and built new houses. And some people that lived here for a long time have built themselves new houses. John, I'm going to ask you and Margaret, what were your responsibilities at home on the farm during the time that you were growing up?

**John Brown:** Well, we had 18 milk cows, and as soon as I got home, my mother was coming with those buckets. And I hated to see her coming with those buckets, but my job was going after those cows.

**Barnes:** So you had the responsibility of milking the cows once you got home from school?

**John Brown:** Yeah.

**Barnes:** And you didn't like to see your mother coming with the buckets because you knew what that was going to...

**John Brown:** I had to walk out in the fields and get the cows.

**Barnes:** Round them up and bring them in, I guess.

**John Brown:** Yeah.

**Barnes:** And milk them.

**John Brown:** Whole milk and cream.

**Barnes:** And that was another way to make income on the farm?

**John Brown:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Barnes:** And anything else that you had as far as responsibilities? Of course, 18 milk cows was a pretty big responsibility. I can't imagine...

**John Brown:** One responsibility was hoeing that garden.

**Barnes:** Oh, taking care of the garden.

**John Brown:** Yeah.

**Barnes:** And I will have to mention here that John has been known far and wide for his great gardens. And I'll tell you what, some of the best tomatoes I ever ate came out of John Brown's garden. And the best peaches I ever ate came from John Brown's peach trees out on his farm.

**John Brown:** Yeah.

**Barnes:** And John would you like to share with us how you used to distribute those? Do you remember how you brought those to me the first time and where you brought them to me?

**John Brown:** I think I brought them to church but initially I brought them to your house.

**Barnes:** Well, you brought-- there were several times that I would get out of church out at New Providence and I would go to my car out in the parking area there. And I would find a sack of the prettiest peaches you ever saw.

**John Brown:** Yeah.

**Barnes:** A big sack of tomatoes, and John had left those on the front seat of my car and I wasn't the only one. I mean, John had-- you told me, John, one time how many rows of tomatoes you planted one time and he had bushels and bushels and bushels of...

**John Brown:** We planted 17 rows.

**Barnes:** 17 rows of tomatoes and he had enough for everybody in northern Rockbridge County. [laughter] I think you also brought me some corn, some good corn one time.

**John Brown:** Yeah.

**Barnes:** But the point is, John was very much known for his great gardens and, of course, the responsibility he learned early on how to do that on the farm.

**John Brown:** Mm hm.

**Barnes:** And hoeing the gardens and I guess learning from his parents and others how to plant and take care of a garden.

**John Brown:** Nowadays we have mechanical tillers to work the garden.

**Barnes:** Make it a little bit easier...

**John Brown:** Yeah.

**Barnes:** ...than hoes and shovels and things like that back in earlier times, that's for sure. Would you all like to share with us any humorous stories or anything like that that you were aware of? John, you mentioned one time about the time that you were going to have to haul some manure. Can you tell us that story? That and the car?

**John Brown:** Well, my dad a manure spreader.

**Barnes:** A manure spreader.

**John Brown:** And he had a horse, a new horse, that was a little bit wild. I took the wild horse and a tame horse and Mr. Strickler came down the road through Brownsburg with a Model T. He backfired that thing and scared that wild horse. It took off. Even the doctor's wife got in the car and see if I could turn it over.

**Barnes:** So the horse got scared by the Model T car.

**John Brown:** Yeah.

**Barnes:** And took off down the road and...

**John Brown:** It took off...

**Barnes:** ...that manure spreader and all?

**John Brown:** Yeah. The manure spreader went whipping around that curve down there. I thought it was going to turn over but it didn't.

**Barnes:** And you finally retrieved it, I guess?

**John Brown:** Yeah. Mr. Runkle ran the horse up in the fence. Mr. Runkle crisscrossed the lines, and then you could pull back on it, you know?

**Barnes:** And got him under control?

**John Brown:** Yeah.

**Barnes:** You were also telling a story about John Layton Whitesell's grocery store up there. Was this after you drove the school bus? School bus drivers would end up at John Whitesell's grocery store?

**John Brown:** Yeah, some of the farmers and the school bus drivers would loaf there and they ate cheese and they had crackers and talked about people and gossiped. But they had a good time. I wasn't in on that.

**Barnes:** But once they got their school bus driving and whatever their chores were for that day, they'd end up in John Whitesell's grocery store and eat his cheese and his crackers and you said...

**John Brown:** Yeah. And forget to pay for it.

**Barnes:** ...and forget to pay for it. [laughter] So what did he do?

**John Brown:** He quit having cheese.

**Barnes:** He quit having cheese. [laughter] Well, I don't blame him. That's a great story. John, I know that you all lived here during the Second World War. What do you remember from that particular era?

**John Brown:** We had gas rationing.

**Barnes:** Gas rationing.

**John Brown:** Three gallons for pleasure and five gallons for business. You did a lot of drifting in those days.

**Barnes:** Drifting? You mean you'd put the clutch in and...

**John Brown:** You'd take the gearshift out of gear and do some drifting.

**Barnes:** To save that gasoline. So you got three gallons for?

**John Brown:** Pleasure.

**Barnes:** For pleasure.

**John Brown:** Five for business.

**Barnes:** And five for business. That's really interesting.

**John Brown:** Yeah.

**Barnes:** But about everything else you raised on the farm. We were talking here about when electricity first came to the Brownsburg area and John and Margaret have a story they want to mention here about that, what happened at their home.

**John Brown:** Well, we turned all the switches on, the lights. And then, when they turned the main current on, all the lights came on at one time.

**Barnes:** And this was what year, John?

**John Brown:** Somewhere around '45, wasn't it? I think.

**Barnes:** About 1945.

**Margaret Brown:** We graduated in '42.

**John Brown:** Huh?

**Margaret Brown:** We graduated in '42.

**John Brown:** Yeah. The lights were on then?

**Margaret Brown:** Yeah.

**Barnes:** So it would have been probably the early '40s then when you all got electricity out your way.

**John Brown:** Must have been about '39.

**Barnes:** '39 or '40. And so everybody was excited and when the light switch was thrown, the main one, then you all had lights...

**John Brown:** We got lights so late. Mr. Charlie Dice, he wouldn't let them put a pole on his property and they had to bypass him and go way around and it long time before we were able to get electricity but we finally got it.

**Barnes:** So Mr. Dice didn't want the electric pole on his property because he didn't want electricity.

**John Brown:** But he had electricity himself.

**Barnes:** Oh. So you all had to work around that.

**John Brown:** Yeah.

**Barnes:** He just didn't want to cooperate then, I guess?

**John Brown:** No, he wouldn't. But he had electricity, but he didn't let us have any.

**Barnes:** John, do you remember some of the specific businesses, particular businesses that were here in Brownsburg during the time you were growing up?

**John Brown:** They have five stores.

**Barnes:** Five general stores?

**John Brown:** And a harness making place, a shoe repair shop, and a blacksmith shop and a whole lot more I can't even think of but...

**Barnes:** So it was...

**John Brown:** I think there was a saddle shop.

**Barnes:** Somebody mentioned a Wilbourn Saddle that was made here.

**John Brown:** Yeah.

**Barnes:** So it was a thriving community and whatever you needed, you could find in Brownsburg then.

**John Brown:** Yes.

**Barnes:** For the most part.

[End of Tape 1, Side A]



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